HR-338 The Value of the County Engineer: Strategies for Expanding the Shrinking Employment Pool

Key Words: Employment, County Engineers,

ABSTRACT

Phase One:

The first phase of this research involved an effort to identify the issues relevant to gaining a better understanding of the County Engineering profession. A related objective was to develop strategies to attract responsible, motivated and committed professionals to pursue County Engineering positions. In an era where a large percentage of County Engineers are reaching retirement age, the shrinking employment pool may eventually jeopardize the quality of secondary road systems not only in Iowa, but nationwide. As we move toward the 21st century, in an era of declining resources, it is likely that professional staff members in charge of secondary roads will find themselves working with less flexible budgets for the construction and maintenance of roads and bridges. It was important to understand the challenges presented to them, and the degree to which those challenges will demand greater expertise in prioritizing resource allocations for the rehabilitation and maintenance of the 10 million miles of county roads nationwide. Only after understanding what a county engineer is and what this person does will it become feasible for the profession to begin "selling itself', i.e., attracting a new generation of County Engineers. Reaching this objective involved examining the responsibilities, goals, and, sometimes, the frustrations experienced by those persons in charge of secondary road systems in the nine states' that agreed to participate in the study.

Phase Two:

The second phase of this research involved addressing ways to counter the problems associated with the exodus of County Engineers who are reaching retirement age. Many of the questions asked of participants asked them to compare the advantages and disadvantages of public sector work with the private sector. Based on interviews with nearly 50 County Engineers and feedback from 268 who returned surveys for the research, issues relevant to the profession were analyzed and recommendations were made to the profession as it prepares to attract a new generation. It was concluded that both State and Regional Associations for County Engineers, and the National Association of County Engineers are most well situated to present opportunities for continued professional development. This factor is appealing for those who are interested in competitive advantages as professionals. While salaries in the public sector may not be able to effectively compete with those offered by the private sector, it was concluded that this is only one factor of concern to those who are in the business of "public service". It

was concluded, however, that Boards of Supervisors and their equivalents in other states will need to more clearly understand the value of the contributions made by County Engineers.

1. There were initially eight states involved in this research including Iowa, Kansas, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, Ohio, and Washington. Following participation at a conference in South Dakota, however, Dr. Waggoner was asked to include that state in the research as well. Responses from Missouri were low (only 18 of 66 surveys were returned) and, as such were of limited value. Because of this Missouri was eliminated from the analysis and South Dakota was substituted.

2. Hereafter, when the term County Engineer is used, it shall refer to all persons in charge of secondary road systems within those counties represented in this study. This is in no way intended to denigrate the credentials of those holding the P.E. license. Four states, including Iowa, Minnesota, Ohio, and Washington, require the registered Professional Engineer's license for County Engineers, while the remaining states. including Kansas, Michigan, South Dakota, and Nebraska do not. Those responding to the survey, therefore, include non-P.E. Road and Highway Superintendents as well as P.E.s.